

## FAQs on Frequent Flyer & Other Travel Awards

We occasionally receive inquiries concerning the use of frequent flyer miles and other promotional awards received as a result of official travel. The answers to the following questions are based upon recent Comptroller General decisions and NASA regulations.

***Are employees permitted to retain for personal use frequent flyer miles accrued as a result of official travel?***

No. A federal employee is required to account for **any** gift, gratuity, or benefit received from private sources incident to the performance of official duty. Any item of value to the government received from a commercial air carrier as a result of the purchase of an airline ticket for official travel is considered property of the U.S. government. Lodging awards based upon official travel are also government property.

***Does this prohibition include cash or credit rebates or mileage credits earned as a result of using a certain credit card?***

No. These benefits are distinguishable from promotional benefits of value to the government, such as half-fare coupons, free companion tickets and mileage bonus points awarded incident to the purchase of a travel ticket for official business. Rebates, such as cash back from the use of Discover Card or free groceries through the use of a VISA, and benefits from other so-called "affinity cards," do not accrue as a result of official travel. They accrue as a result of the use of a personal credit card in the course of official business. The method of payment is purely personal to the employee.

***Does this mean that I can always use my personal credit card to pay for official travel and retain the rebates or other benefits for personal use?***

For official travel, NASA's Financial Management Manual states that the Government-issued charge card or Government Transportation Requests (GTRs) *will* be used to obtain official transportation. The use of cash, the definition of which includes personal credit cards, is generally not authorized to procure passenger transportation services.

***What types of expenses can be charged to a personal credit card?***

Very few. As a matter of policy, the IG expects her employees to use the government-issued charge card for official travel. NASA encourages all employees to use the government-issued charge card to pay for official travel expenses to the maximum extent possible. NASA expects its employees to be able to use the government-issued charge card to charge most major expenses of government travel. However, certain expenses, such as parking fees, tolls, taxi fares and gasoline for POV on official travel, may be paid by cash. Effective for travel on or after December 31, 1999, GSA will *require* use of the government-issued charge card for all official travel purchases where the card is accepted.

***What is the consequence of commingling in the same account my personally earned frequent flyer miles and miles accrued as a result of purchase of official transportation?***

If adequate records clearly distinguish mileage credits earned on personal travel from those obtained from official travel, employees would be free to make use of those personal mileage credits. IG employees are strongly encouraged to establish separate accounts for personal and official travel, and to claim frequent flyer mileage, especially for recurring trips where the same carrier is used routinely.

***Can I use frequent flyer mileage accrued as a result of official travel to upgrade my airline ticket for subsequent official travel?***

Premium upgrades (other than first class) are permissible. For example, business class upgrades on long haul international flights would be allowed.

***I have frequent flyer accounts with both Delta Airlines and Trans World Airlines, each account containing both government and personal mileage. While the total government and personal mileage in each account is sufficient to qualify for a free ticket, neither account has sufficient government or personal mileage alone to qualify for a ticket. Can I trade the personal mileage from one account for the government mileage in the other account?***

GAO has no objection to this practice. This would enable the employee to qualify for a ticket for personal use on one airline and for a ticket for official use on the other. You propose an exchange of government miles in return for personal miles with a resulting benefit to both the agency and to you. GSA's guidance and regulations do not address trading frequent flyer miles between an agency and an employee. However, this is a trade of mileage credits which would otherwise go unused and which results in savings to the agency by enabling it to obtain free transportation, but also provides a benefit to the employee. GAO believes such a trade falls within the spirit and intent of the GSA guidance and the travel statutes.